Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Black in Latin America
Afro-Mexicans are like sugar in coffee; you can't see them, but they make the whole thing taste much better.

—Sagrario Cruz-Carretero

The days of pure whites, victors of today, are as numbered as were the days of their predecessors. . . . [We are entering] the period of fusion and mixing of all peoples.

. . . The mestizo will produce a civilization more universal in its tendency than any other race in the past.

—José María Vasconcelos, 1925

ON THE WALL in my dining room hangs a work of art entitled “Lucky,” one of the collages or works of found art created by the African American artist Susan Stoval. “Lucky” is a dapper black man. He is standing, supported by a cane, one ankle crossing the other, wearing a bow tie, an elegant Panama hat, and brown and white leather shoes. The figure “26” sits in the frame of his portrait. He is the subject of a drawing, not the center of a portrait; nevertheless, he is not a type of racist caricature. I have always liked this image of Lucky; in fact, it makes me feel lucky myself, which is one reason why I keep this dapper black man in view of the dining table, where I try to write each day. It was several years after acquiring this image that I learned (from Pablo Gonzalez, a framer visiting my house to hang new Stoval collages) that “Lucky” was actually one of fifty-four figures in a very popular Mexican card game, La Lotería Mexicana, or “Mexican Bingo.” What in the world was a black man—known affectionately as “El negrito”—doing functioning almost at the center of an array of fifty-four images in one of Mexico’s most
popular board games, among images entitled “The Rooster,” “The Little Devil,” “The Lady,” “The Dandy,” “The Watermelon,” “The Apache,” “The Skull,” “The Rose,” “The Scorpion,” and “Death,” sandwiched between number 25, “El borracho” (The Drunk), and number 27, “El corazón” (The Heart)? And while a literal English translation for el negrito is “little black man,” in standard reference works on La Lotería, the term can be used within families, for example, in a kind and loving way, sometimes independent of race, a term of endearment, without irony. But various sources also gloss el negrito as “the slave, the Negro.”

Each of the fifty-four figures in the game is assigned a short motto or description. And what is Lucky’s? “The one that ate the sugar.” What was this riddle about? What was a black man—not a mulatto in any way but a man with demonstrably Negroid features—doing at the center of a popular Mexican parlor game? Lucky, or El negrito, is a trace of Mexico’s long-buried African past. You might say that solving the riddle of the origins of this black man set in motion my desire to explore the African presence in Mexico.

I set out on my journey, nearly overwhelmed by the implications of the research about the slave trade in Mexico that I had just received from the historian David Eltis. Eltis directs the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, an Internet site freely accessible to all, which consists of a vast database of about thirty-five thousand voyages of slave ships to the New World, between 1502 and 1866. In the earliest years of the slave trade—up until about 1600—the database indicates that Mexico would have had the largest slave population in the New World. Moreover, according to the most recent estimates from Eltis, approximately seven hundred thousand Africans were brought to Mexico and Peru combined over the course of the slave trade, an estimate much higher than previously thought. That is a quarter million more black people than came to the United States in the entire course of the slave trade! If this is so, where are their descendants? Why don’t we think of Mexico as an Afro-Latin American country?

Hernán Cortés was the first conquistador to arrive in Mexican territory in 1519. The final conquest of Mexico-Tenochtitlan took place in 1521. Soon after, the Spanish started to settle there, as they would do in Peru, and a surprisingly large slave trade began. By 1580, Spanish people had been living in Mexico for sixty years. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, although the slave trade had hardly begun, Mexico had one of the biggest slave populations in Latin America, and I would venture that very few Americans realize this. Before 1550, most of the slaves were taken to the island of Hispaniola. The sixteenth-century historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés described Hispaniola as a “new Guinea” at about this time. To put this in perspective, by 1550, the island of Hispaniola—the home of Haiti and the Dominican Republic today—was in the midst of its sugar boom, which lasted until 1580. But Mexico was itself beginning to boom economically, thanks to silver-mining discoveries in the 1540s. Mexico was in its early stages of colonization, but it took off quickly and was getting to be quite prominent by the mid- to late-sixteenth century. In other words, Mexico and Hispaniola were both experiencing a form of economic boom between 1550 and 1580; and Mexico surpassed Hispaniola in economic importance before the end of the sixteenth century.

Where are the descendants of these slaves today? Do they hope for racial democracy, as Afro-Brazilians do? What do Afro-Mexican children know of their heritage, and how do the descendants of Mexico’s slaves see their future? Do they exist as a distinct class or ethnic group, or is the black presence buried deep in the admixture of Mexico’s collective DNA?

I started my search for answers in the great port city of Veracruz. I knew that beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, this was the main portal of arrival for Mexico’s slave trade, as well as for almost every other commodity. I’d been lucky to get in touch with two local scholars: Judith Hernández, an archaeologist, and Sagrado Cruz-Carretero, professor of anthropology at the University of Veracruz. We met at the port, the very place all those slaves would have entered the country.

Hernández and Cruz-Carretero told me that historical recorcs indicate that it could have taken as long as two months for ships to reach Veracruz from the ports of West and Central Africa—far longer than it took to reach Brazil. Of course, the slave ships were hot and humid like steam baths. Slaves capable of retaining salt in their system, they said, were actually more likely to survive because they retained more water, which enabled them to avoid dehydration through the torturous journey. (This theory, known as the “Salt Thesis,” goes on to speculate that this is why so many descendants of slaves in the United States suffer from hypertension.) Nonetheless, about 15 percent of the Africans died during the Middle Passage.
“From 150 to 400 pesos,” Cruz-Carretero answered. “Let me compare: a house costs 400 pesos. It was a luxury.” So a house and a slave to work the fields to pay for the house could cost about the same amount of money, though prices of houses could vary widely, ranging from 200 pesos to 5,000 pesos. And this variation reveals why, for some hacienda owners, slaves were not always considered a luxury.

I took a moment to think about that. Even among scholars who spend their careers researching the slave trade, it’s sobering to talk about the price of a person. “These walls are covered with African blood,” Cruz-Carretero said, waving her hand at the many historic structures lining the waterfront. “The indigenous population decreased because of illness, so Africans were the ones who constructed these gorgeous buildings. And many of them died in the process. All these walls have the fingerprints of all these Africans. This is the fingerprint of black history in Mexico. It’s a history of death and a history of invisibility.”

Death and invisibility—those words struck me. They were powerful, ominous. I wondered if I would find them to be true. I wondered if, as in Brazil, Mexican slavery was also a history of creation, cultural contributions, and miscegenation.

Soon after, Hernández had to leave us, so Cruz-Carretero and I went off to have lunch. At the table, she pulled out a small bundle of
family photos to show me. We pored over images of her grandfather, her parents, and her aunts and cousins. Many of them looked indigenous. But in one photo after another, Cruz-Carretero pointed out the black physical features—broad noses, thick lips, kinky hair—the traces of Africa on the very faces of her family. Her family's gene pool was mixed, she explained, with a demonstrable dose of Africa in the mix. And then she told me that she hadn't known about her black genetic heritage until she was nineteen years old.

"How did you find out you were part black?" I asked her.

"I traveled to Cuba," she explained. "When I arrived there, they started talking about African heritage and culture. And I suddenly realized my family was black—because they looked like my grandfather, like my father. I started tasting the food, and I said, 'Oh, my God—this is the food my grandmother prepares at home.'"

I asked Cruz-Carretero how it felt to find out that she had this strain of black ancestry in a country where black people don't officially exist. Cruz-Carretero was nineteen. Was it a positive discovery, or was being of African slave ancestry somehow a badge of shame, which might explain why it took her nineteen years to learn this about her ancestry?

Cruz-Carretero understood the strangeness of her experience. When I asked her about it, she clapsed her hands in front of her, thoughtfully cocking her head. "It was weird," she said finally, "very weird. It was like discovering you were adopted and had never known. I came back to Mexico and asked my grandpa why he never told me we were black. And he told me, holding my hand, 'We are not black; we're morenos.'"

This was fascinating to me. Morenos is a word for a person of mixed race popularly used in parts of Mexico such as Oaxaca and Guerrero. It's a regional term, but it illuminates a much larger national discourse. For centuries, Mexico had sixteen categories of racial mixture, or shades of blackness and brownness, called the castas, or ideal types, into which the offspring of mixed sexual unions in Mexico were assigned. Some historians have maintained that the images of these types, which in the eighteenth century were frequently painted in sets, were designed for visiting tourists from Spain, but other historians argue these four-inch-by-four-inch paradigms for race mixture were done in the context of and derived from Enlightenment theories about the diversity and classification of plants, nature, fruits, works, and people—in other words, that they were the result of a "scientific" thrust. Still others argue that they were produced for domestic consumption, not for visitors. Regardless of their target audience, think octroon or quadroon, times eight.

Morenos are not depicted in the casta paintings as one of the sixteen official shades, perhaps because the term is of regional origin. But this may not be the whole story. As the historian Ben Vinson III explained to me, "Actually, there are probably more categories of blackness. The casta paintings were typically done in sets of sixteen images showing the progression of racial mixture as different 'types' intermarried with 'whites.' This may be where the number sixteen comes from. Also, some argue that the casta paintings were actually shipped abroad for consumption by Europeans (especially Spaniards)—giving them a sense of what life was like (including flora and fauna) in the New World. Hence, many think that the paintings were oriented for export. With this said, there was a domestic market as well. There were variances between the audiences in Peru and Mexico for the paintings. Despite the paintings, casta nomenclature was alive and well, and there may have been at least eighteen different racial categories used semantically in what we know to be colonial Mexico."
As Cruz-Carretero explained the history of racial classification within her own family, I nodded in recognition of a larger phenomenon, one that I encountered throughout my research in Latin America. Just as I had in Brazil, I was encountering here in Mexico a society in which traces of black roots were buried in brownness. Blackness was okay, if it was part of a blend, an ingredient that doesn’t exactly disappear but that is only rendered present through a trace, a hint, a telltale sign. Few people in Latin America, it seemed, wanted to be called “negro,” or “black.” Like so many people who would be defined as “black” or “African American” in the United States, Cruz-Carretero’s grandfather, according to her, was declaring that his family’s mixed-race heritage was a shield against being defined as “black,” as a “negro.” Was this a case of the pernicious American phenomenon, “If you are black, get back. If you are brown, stick around. If you are white, you are all right”? I was determined to find out, eager to avoid imposing my value system on a foreign people.

Cruz-Carretero said about her grandfather, “He was aware that he was a black man, but he rejected that identity. And I think this is something that happens in most families—but you can’t talk about it. You hide the black grandma in the closet.”

The black grandma in the closet. What an apt turn of phrase. The genetic outlier, that telltale recessive gene, popping up out of nowhere, seemingly, as in the category in the casta painting named “torna atrás,” meaning “go back” and signifying the moment in a family’s line when black features show up from less black parents. (As we shall see, the similar phrase in the Dominican Republic is that all of its seemingly white or “Indio” citizens are, in fact, “black behind the ears.”) Except that “nowhere,” we now know, consisted of more than half of the seven hundred thousand Africans dragged to Mexico and Peru to create colonial economies. I turned my head to watch the steady stream of Mexicans passing our table. Some faces looked brown, some a little red, some a light tan, some almost white. Others were very dark. But as much as the races had clearly mixed, I wondered if they were equal, if color was class, as it seemed to be in Brazil.

“Why, in every mixed-race society, is black always on the bottom?” I asked Cruz-Carretero.

“It’s part of human nature,” she replied, shrugging, referring to the “color as class” systems that arose in slave societies in the United States, throughout the Caribbean, and in Latin America. “There’s a system of ‘pigmentocracy,’ locating you within social parameters according to the color of your skin. Being lighter skinned puts you in good social position.” This was certainly true according to the unconscious classification system in Mexico and throughout the New World. But it is also true that in some periods and regions in Mexico, black people were in a better social position than were the indigenous peoples, and that reality persists in some regions even today. Also, of course, as we shall see, not all black people remained slaves. Racial theories that devalued the blackest colors of human skin arose to justify the New World’s economic order based on the exploitation of the labor of people whose faces wore this very skin.

I told Cruz-Carretero that I thought she was absolutely right. In mixed-race societies, color is used, in part, to mark class. You see it in Africa, in India, in Asia, throughout the Americas. And this fact contains another—something I’ve also seen over and over again: it is very tempting to hide one’s blackness in a mixed-race culture. Cruz-Carretero nodded her head in agreement and explained that most of her family members can easily pass for being indigenous, so they choose to do that. Lighter-skinned Mexican women, she continued, bleach their hair to look more European. From inside a culture that actively works to whiten itself—as Brazil had done and as I learned Mexico had done — claiming African heritage isn’t always easy, especially when your skin color and physical characteristics don’t look African to others. Those who don’t think you look black, she said, feel free to tell you you’re not. After all, it is supposed, why would anyone want to be that?

“But who owns the negrometer?” she asked me, with a slight smile masking a serious purpose. “Who owns the records and can say who is black and who is not? It’s our duty to try to change the idea that being black means being ugly and the idea that the name is derogatory. Otherwise, you’re going to be denigrated if you accept your blackness.”

I told her it was a great question, that I’d been thinking about this for a very long time, but I didn’t know the answer. It’s tempting to think that the upper classes—those with the most to gain and lose—are the ones who invent and enforce color distinctions. But history suggests otherwise. The blame, I told Cruz-Carretero, needs to be widely distributed. The “negrometer” lies, to some extent, in all of us.

At the end of the day, I left Cruz-Carretero and Veracruz, impressed
that a person not obviously black had so enthusiastically embraced her African heritage, and I began a long drive to the inland city of Tlacotalpan. On my way, I leafed through my sheaf of notes. Tlacotalpan was a major colonial trading post. Sugar, cotton, cattle, horses, and slaves all came through it—commodities that were produced by indigenous and African slaves, along with their offspring, who were often the mixed-race children of European settlers. When slaves were moved deeper into Mexico from Veracruz, this is one of the places they went.

Walking through the streets, I saw a quaint, historic city that probably hasn’t changed much since the early seventeenth century. At a little square surrounded by cafés, I met Rafael Figueroa, an ethnomusicologist. Figueroa studies cultures by analyzing their music. He was eager to talk with me about—or, rather, to show me—how African and Mexican and indigenous influences had combined to create new musical forms. Following lunch, he told me that I was in luck because the town would be performing a traditional fandango later that night. I could scarcely stand the anticipation.

We headed for the town square, just after the sun had set, in the cool of the evening. Just about everybody in the town seemed to be there. Chairs had been assembled around an elevated wooden platform, and they were quickly filling up. Figueroa led me across the street to an area where musicians were playing and females and males in various combinations and ranging over a lifespan of ages were dancing with great energy. They took turns dancing on the elevated platform, and the sound of the girls’ stamping feet reverberated through the square. I was entranced. The passionate movements of the dance reminded me of Spanish flamenco, but the polyrhythms in the music were African. And there was another influence too, one that I learned came from indigenous tradition. This blend, Figueroa said, was fandango.

I had always thought that fandango was a European musical form. I associated it with Argentina and Brazil, of course, but only as a residue of Spanish and Portuguese colonial rule. I’d never thought of it as African. Figueroa set me straight. “Fandango—it’s a mix of Hispanic and African, mainly,” he explained. “Even though the instruments are Hispanic, they are played in a really percussive way, and they are played against each other in aggressive polyrhythms. The platform, we call it the tarima. And it’s a musical instrument by itself.”

“Fandango is a regular party for us,” he said, smiling. “You can do a fandango at your birthday, if you are going to get married, or just for the sake of it. There are private fandangos in the backyard, and there are public fandangos like this one. It’s always just a celebration of music and dance. It’s just to have a good time.”

“That’s definitely black,” I laughed.

“Exactly,” he laughed back.

“Those girls are great,” I marveled. “Now, do the boys dance or just the girls?”

“Well, they always say that the first dance is to watch the girls,” Figueroa explained, winking, “so you can see if you want to dance with one of them later. I’ve seen fandangos still going around 6:00 or 7:00 a.m.”

“A.m.?” I responded. “I love this town!”

Figueroa pointed out the African rhythms in the music, the Mexican guitar flourishes, and the strong influences of Spain. Like Carnaval
in Brazil, I realized, fandango was born out of a complex mix of cultures. And as we chatted, I learned that many songs and forms that I considered Mexican actually had mixed-race histories. The complicated dance steps known as zapateo combine Spanish and African traditions. Even "La Bamba," arguably the best-known Mexican song, had African roots, Figueroa told me. Slaves from Angola and the Congo first sang that tune in Mexico as early as 1683.

This country has blackness all over it, I thought. So why can't we see it? I asked Figueroa why most Mexicans don't look black and why the nation's African heritage isn't more prominent in its cultural identity.

"They mixed, from the beginning," Figueroa answered, referring to indigenous people, slaves, and Europeans. "That's why you can't see it—but it's here." Blackness in Mexico had become diluted, he explained. In some areas, like the Costa Chica on the West Coast and Veracruz on the East Coast, the people still look a little African. But even when Mexicans don't look black, they sometimes reveal their African lineage in the way they speak, he explained. Since I have written about African American spoken language, I wanted to learn more about this idea.

"We have a specific accent," he continued. "When we say 'helado,' which means 'ice cream,' we drop the d, so it's 'hela'o.' Sometimes we drop the final s from words. It's really common among people of African origin." It was also a common usage of the old form of speaking Spanish during the colonial period.

"Hey, I've noticed that," I said, realizing I'd discovered one key to unlocking Mexico's hidden blackness. "I've noticed that some people say 'Buenos día' instead of 'Buenos días,' and I wondered what was wrong with them!" "Precisely," he replied, ever the good professor, trying to encourage an eager pupil. (I noticed this accent, too, in the Dominican Republic; even when the s is intervocal, it is almost a silent letter, as in "hablo español"—rather than "hablo español").

I asked Figueroa about his own black ancestry. He told me that his mother's hair was very curly and that she knew she had African blood. Remembering Cruz-Carretero's story, I asked Figueroa how his mother felt about that hair. He said she was proud of her heritage—but that pride in blackness has its limits. "For a lot of people, dark skin is a symbol of beauty," he explained. "But it's a little of a love-hate relationship. You don't like it in your kids. If your kid is born lighter than you, you'll say that you're 'improving the race.'"

I have heard that phrase so often in the black community in the United States, though more in the fifties and sixties, of course, than today. And my sister-in-law, Gemina Pená Gates, once told me that her aunt used to say it all the time back home in Puerto Rico. I told Figueroa that I recognized the expression, that they used to say that back home, too, and that I'd heard it myself, many times.

Late that night, as the music of the fandango slowly receded, I retreated to my hotel room, alone with my thoughts. If half a million slaves had come through Veracruz and, to a lesser extent, Acapulco, how did they become black grandmas in the closet, five hundred years later? Why had ethnic mixing here so very effectively pulverized African physical characteristics? What had happened?

The next morning, I traveled to the town of Yanga, hoping to find some clues. It's a place with a fascinating history. In 1553, the Spanish viceroy Luis de Velasco pleaded with King Charles of Spain to limit the number of slaves traveling to Mexico. Velasco was concerned that Mexico already had too many Africans—and he feared what they might do if they were organized. It turned out he had good reason. In 1570, a slave named Gaspar Yanga escaped and led a group of his fellow Africans to freedom here in the mountains of Veracruz. Not only did he escape slavery fifty years before the Mayflower landed on Plymouth Rock, but he launched guerrilla attacks on the Spanish, tormenting them from the mountains for three decades. The Spanish could never catch him, never put him back in bondage. So in 1609, they gave up and offered him a town of his own in exchange for peace, as long as he refused to give sanction to fugitive slaves. The town of Yanga became one of the first communities founded by free blacks in North or South America—quite possibly, according to some historians, the very first.

I was excited to see Yanga. Let's face it, I was crazy to see it. I barely waited for the car to stop before popping out in the main square. Above me towered a magnificent statue of the man himself, and I paused just a moment to admire his image.

I wanted to know what the residents of this town knew and felt about their history. So I started looking for people to talk to in a nearby park. I immediately encountered a girl named Carmen, and soon others started to gather. They were, I think, drawn by my camera crew, rather than my endless questions. But they were eager to talk.

"Carmen, who is Yanga?" I asked.
A hero," she replied. "He made Yanga people free."

"A black slave," a man piped in. "Supposedly, he was a slave of the Spanish who broke the chains."

"He freed himself from the oppression of the Spanish," the man's girlfriend added. "He liberated the slaves."

"That's why they call Yanga the first free town in the Americas!" exclaimed a young boy. I couldn't wipe the smile off my face. This was great.

"Is everyone in this town black?" I asked.

"No, the people I know are brown," the woman answered.

I asked the people around me what color they considered themselves. The answers were familiar: moreno, mulatto, other shades of brown. I came back around to my new friend Carmen. She looked indigenuous to me, so I asked if she was Indian. "Negro," she said shyly, her eyes shining up at me. Now that's what I am talking about!

It was hard not to enjoy the people of Yanga. They certainly indulged me. And I spent hours exploring the town. But, in the end, I have to admit that it just wasn't the nucleus of black pride I expected. I imagined I'd find museums celebrating African culture, schools dedicated to keeping African music and art alive. I thought I'd find another place like Brazil's Bahia—a thriving black community that trumpeted its African history. Instead, Yanga was something else. It had started black, but like so much of Mexico, it had evolved into a blended brown.

My next stop was the center of the nation: Mexico City, the largest city in the Americas today—a modern, vibrant, bustling metropolis with twenty-one million residents, a magisterial and diverse place since ancient times. The Aztecs called it Tenochtitlan—and made it the seat of their empire. When Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés first came to Mexico in 1519, he visited Tenochtitlan with another conquistador, Juan Garrido—a free black man. They were both amazed by what they found. The Aztecs had built a complex irrigation system. The city was stunningly beautiful, and of course, it was full of gold. Cortés soon conquered Tenochtitlan, cruelly, along with one hundred thousand soldiers from Tlaxcala, which remains a semi-independent region to this day because of it. (The indigenous Tlaxcalans never get any credit for being the real conquerors of Tenochtitlan, even though they wrote about it and illustrated it for centuries in their own language. But this doesn't fit in neatly with our story of European conquest of the New World.) And over centuries, modern Mexico City was built in the place of Tenochtitlan—ancient Aztec ruins lie in its center.

I went to meet with María Elisa Velázquez at the National Museum of Mexico. Velázquez does research and teaches history, and I was eager to get her take on what had shaped Mexico's black experience. She greeted me warmly at the imposing, impressive museum, and we soon got down to business. She told me she'd been looking forward to showing me a collection of the _casta_ paintings—painted by local artists in the eighteenth century basically to show Europeans the cultural and racial diversity of the people of Mexico (or New Spain, as it was called).

I was quite intrigued, to say the least. These paintings were created in the Enlightenment, during years of intense racial mixing, Velázquez told me—hence the impulse to catalogue racial types. They were the product of a unique set of historical circumstances. From the start of the slave trade, white masters had produced children with African and indigenous slaves (Spanish men born in the New World, known as "criollos," frequently impregnated black women, often by force). In addition, Africans and the indigenous population had intermingled and had their own children together. Blessings from the church increased this racial mixing—as the Catholic Church began to recognize mixed marriages (there were no civil marriages), and the government granted freedom to slaves born of African and indigenous women.

Mexico, very early on in its colonial history, was becoming a true melting pot, and its colonial masters were very curious about this. Europeans and Mexicans commissioned the _casta_ paintings, Velázquez explained, almost like a theoretical guide book or encyclopedia to the diversity of the New World. They wanted these images to serve as a sort of catalogue or typology of the new categories or ideal types of black and brown and white genetic combinations that had been created in the New World by all that mixing. But despite the temptation to see them in this way, she continued, they were not an anthropological cookbook—actual recipes—for lightening the Mexican race; they did not perform a prescriptive function. Nor were these categories, unlike as in Brazil, used in documents or in daily life, except for a few, such as _negro_, _mulato_, _mestizo_, and _zambo_. Still, I was struck by how many times I would hear people employing these words today, all these centuries after they were first coined. So perhaps their descriptive function had had a certain sort of prescriptive one as well. And,
of course, I remembered Ben Vinson's advice that there were quite possibly more than sixteen categories of blackness that were achievable, since the number sixteen seems to have derived from the series typically making up a *casta* painting “set.” While many of these mixtures depicted in the *casta* series had no black in them at all, Vinson explained, “I think that there were more than sixteen categories in use during colonial times.”

Looking at the *casta* paintings, I saw small portraits organized in a grid, four images across and four down. Tidily and clinically, they detail one artist’s conception of the sixteen *castas* in Mexico, though these designations and categories could change in each region and time period, and though a priest’s own subjective perspective influenced the way a person might be described. Sixteen is a lot of categories, but, again, it is not nearly as many formal categories of blackness, certainly, as we saw in Brazil but far more than we ever dreamed of employing in the United States.

Velázquez explained them to me, one by one. Spanish and Indian makes *mestizo*. *Mestizo* and Spanish makes *castizo*. And as I was tickled to learn, *castizo* and Spanish makes . . . Spanish again.

“What about me?” I asked. “Which one of the sixteen would I be?”

“You would be here,” she said, pointing again: “a mulatto.” A mulatto in Mexico but not a mulatto in Brazil.

I asked about Barack Obama and Beyoncé. They’d be mulatto too, Velázquez told me. But Tiger Woods, he’d be *lobo*, because he is a mix of African and indigenous, or “Indio.” (Mexico had a lot of “chinos,” in fact, people from all over East Asia who were brought in through Acapulco from the Manila fleet. They were quite common on the Pacific side of Mexico, though they indeed tend to blend in as “Indios” in time.) Why did the intermixing of African genes with European ones seem to lead to this intense fascination with exact degrees of color? “These people were crazy,” I blurted out, before looking sideways at Velázquez to see how she’d take it. She smiled in return.

“They needed pseudoscientific reasons to explain why some races were inferior,” she said, and therefore could be exploited as free or cheap labor. The ruling classes also were seeking to justify their elite status through an appeal to a biological or “natural” white-skin privilege, something that was just an aspect of the larger order of things.

“And they found it,” I responded: “sixteen shades of blackness and brownness,” remembering that the indigenous people are in the genetic mix as well. Upon a moment’s reflection, however, I had to admit that I was surprised by the freedom to mix so much in the first place. In the United States, a single drop of black blood can define you, no matter what you look like. In Mexico, even though some races were oppressed as slaves, sexual relationships between races clearly weren’t rare.

“Why were your white people more willing to sleep with black people than my white people?” I asked. It sounds a bit silly, but that’s really the question, isn’t it?

“Because the church allowed the marriages,” Velázquez said, “and because Spanish people have a heritage of being more open to mixture due to the Arab presence in Spain.”

“The Moors were in Spain for eight hundred years,” I reminded myself aloud. I’d never really thought about what that meant for Spanish bloodlines.

“Exactly,” she responded. “So it was kind of easy to have these kinds of mixtures.”

“So there wasn’t color prejudice in colonial Mexico?” I asked. I was fascinated but confused. This culture wasn’t so easy to pin down.

“Yes, there was,” she said slowly, trying to think of the best way to explain it. “But it wasn’t as important as it became in the eighteenth century. Before that, African people had some opportunities in certain trades, and they could marry indigenous people and Spanish people. They could improve their conditions in life. But then the slave trade became more important. The Spanish needed to have proof that some cultures were inferior. All these words describing races were created at that moment.”

I looked back at the *casta* paintings, and I realized I was looking at the birth of a new kind of racism in Mexico. Before the eighteenth century, Africans were kept as slaves because, well, someone had enslaved them. But after the period when we saw the creation of the *casta* paintings (though not because of them, certainly), when people were drawing on pseudoscience to justify economic exploitation, Africans were kept as slaves because they were deemed “scientifically” inferior. This wasn’t human nature, as my lunch companion Cruz-Carretero had generously described it. This was a conscious effort to diminish another people, to draw on “science” to justify an economic order, an economic order that was brutal, harsh, and meant to be eternal. Relatively few of
Mexico's total slave population arrived in the sixteenth century before 1580, but then a big wave began to arrive. That wave petered out in about 1650 or so, and very few more slaves were imported. That means that about a century of mixing took place before the *casta* paintings were created.

Velázquez asked if I'd like to see the museum's exhibit on the Mexican revolution, and I realized I was happy to move on. As a scholar of race, I was deeply satisfied to see the *casta* paintings with my own eyes. But as a black man, I needed some time to digest all that they stood for.

We ambled toward another part of the museum, and Velázquez explained that a priest named Father Hidalgo had launched Mexico's War of Independence in 1810, calling for an end to the entire *casta* system and of slavery. He urged all Mexicans, whatever their color or ancestry, to think of themselves as equals. And he found his country eager for such a message. The people of Mexico were tired of being ruled by Spain, and the American Revolution and the French Revolution inspired them to fight for their own independence.

The war was difficult, bloody, and long, Velázquez explained. It lasted more than a decade, and Father Hidalgo himself did not live to see the end. He was captured and executed by the Spanish in 1811. But his fight was taken up by two generals: José María Morelos y Pavón and Vicente Ramón Guerrero Saldaña. They were great heroes in the war, he told me, and they were both descended from Africans.

That stopped me in my tracks.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," I said, waving my hands. "Two black people were generals in the Mexican War of Independence? This is like George Washington being black. That's astonishing."

Velázquez led me straight to a portrait of Morelos, looking majestic in full military dress. This was one resplendent black man.

"Morelos definitely is a brother," I said, chuckling. "He would not have been riding in the front of the bus in Mississippi!"

Spanish forces killed Morelos in 1815. But his compatriot, mockingly called "the Negro Guerrero" by his enemies, continued to fight, with the help of thousands of black and white and mixed and indigenous Mexicans. At one point, Guerrero's father, fearing for his son's life, begged him to surrender to the Spanish. Guerrero gave his answer in front of all his men, saying, "You are my father, but the country comes first." A shortened version of this answer, "La patria es primero" (the country comes first), is now a famous Mexican phrase.

Allegiances in the war did not strictly break down along racial lines. Many Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica, Velázquez said, also supported the Spanish government. Nonetheless, it is inspiring to realize that there was such strong black leadership in the independence movement—and that it proved successful. Guerrero, in alliance with Agustín de Iturbide, finally won independence for Mexico in 1821, after ten years of resistance. And in 1829, he abolished slavery once and for all—thirty-three years before Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in the United States. (Morelos tried to abolish it by decree in 1815, but of course that decree didn't apply everywhere in the country.) And that wasn't the end of his accomplishments.

"The important thing about Guerrero," Velázquez told me, "is that he was the second president in Mexico."

The Negro Guerrero—president? "So you had your Barack Obama in 1829!" I blurted out.

"That's right, before the United States," she said, nodding emphatically. I actually sent a text message back home to my friend Larry Bobo, the Du Bois Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard. Bing came his reply. "How come we don't know this!" How come, indeed? Did Mexicans know this? I wondered. On the other hand, how many Americans know anything about Mexican history, anything at all, except maybe the name Pancho Villa?

I also had to wonder what such a figure might have meant for the United States. What if George Washington had been black? Or John Adams? Perhaps a more relevant question is this one: Could George Washington or John Adams have been black? Would we have needed a Civil Rights Movement? My brain was on fire imagining alternative pasts for my own country.

What Velázquez told me next, though, made me pause in my eclectic thinking. Guerrero had indeed abolished slavery. But in 1822, in the service of an ideal of equality, he and his colleagues also removed racial categories from all certificates of birth, marriage, and death. If race didn't exist, they reasoned, then racism couldn't exist. I had encountered this logic in Brazil and would in Peru as well. The idea about abolishing the recording of color differences, as we might expect, was
intended to facilitate the elimination of privileges tied to these color differences. But there were unintended consequences, which Guerrero and his compatriots could not anticipate.

I recognized the well-meaning spirit behind Guerrero’s actions. He had yearned to create a society beyond race, to act as if race didn’t matter. This same spirit gave birth to the idea of racial democracy in Brazil. But denying roots is different from respecting them equally. Guerrero, with the best of intentions, inadvertently took an action that helped, over time, to bury his own African ancestry and that aspect of the genetic heritage of every Afro-Mexican who followed him.

I asked Velázquez if most Mexicans today know that Morelos and Guerrero were black and that they owed their independence, in part, to the leadership of these two Afro-Mexicans. I was disappointed, but not surprised, by her answer. They don’t. These men have towns and states named after them. Morelos even appears on the fifty-peso bill. But their blackness has effectively been buried for far too many Mexicans.

“Many people thought that if we erased the categories of blackness, we would erase racism,” I said. “Do you see any merit in that argument?”

“I don’t agree,” Velázquez answered, shaking her head. “I think we have the right and the need to know about who we are. We have to be proud about it, proud to share a heritage with such important cultures in Africa.”

She explained that Mexican culture is like a braid with three strands: indigenous, African, and Spanish. The strands may be equal in length, but they’re different in color, character, and texture. She made an eloquent argument for accepting racial differences as part of the fight for equality.

I thanked Velázquez for all she’d taught me and left the museum. Our conversation had me running late, so I hustled along the sidewalk, checking my watch. I was leaving Mexico City shortly—indeed, I had only a few hours to spare. But I wanted to review an essay that I knew was critically important to understanding just about everything I’d seen here thus far.

Those who wanted to obliterate race and racial categories in order to eliminate racism possibly could not anticipate the creation of systematic attempts to whiten the image, and genetic admixture, of Mexico. But those who would whiten Mexico didn’t get the last word on the country’s collective ethnic self-identity. Mexico might have followed this lead for a century, denying its multicultural past and whitening its story, even encouraging European immigration, just as Brazil had done, to lighten its collective complexion. But I remembered from my research on the black Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer that in the early twentieth century, the philosopher José María Vasconcelos wrote a groundbreaking paper that changed all that. In his essay “The Cosmic Race,” Vasconcelos argued—boldly and counterintuitively—that Mexico’s distinct mix of indigenous, European, and African “blood,” in fact, made it a superior culture, an augury of the world’s genetic future. He described Mexico’s racial mixing as a unique, ideal destiny, one that prepared the nation for a glorious future. After rummaging through my bags, I sat down with this essay in my hotel room, high above the noise and mayhem of Mexico City’s traffic, and read passages like this:

Perhaps there is nothing useless in historical developments. Our own physical isolation . . . together with the original mixture of bloods, has served to keep us from the Anglo-Saxon limitation of constituting castes of pure races. . . . Never have they been seen to surpass other men, either in talent, or goodness, or in strength. The road we have initiated is much more daring. It breaks away from ancient prejudices, and it would be almost unexplainable if it were not grounded on a sort of clamor that reaches from a remote distance, a distance which is not that of the present, but that mysterious distance from where the presage of the future comes.

When Vasconcelos’s essay was published in 1925, it was an overnight sensation. Mexicans loved this idea. And what today we would call a “brown pride” movement sprang up, practically overnight. It was surely an improvement over massive, systematic efforts at whitening. But what did this movement cost Mexico’s black roots? Did the nationalistic usefulness and popularity of Vasconcelos’s theory have the effect of valorizing the history and heritage of Mexico’s Afro-descendants or of burying them? I had to wonder. When parents celebrate the birth of infants who look lighter than they do, how can this be pride? And what about those whose blackness is visible, indisputable? Those whose black grandma is out of the closet? Does their complexion exclude them from being “cosmic.” I couldn’t help thinking again of Brazil’s Gilberto Freyre and the questionable accomplishments and claims of
Brazil’s “racial democracy.” Indeed, since Vasconcelos preceded Freyre by eight years, I had to presume a measure of influence. Mexicans were much more willing to embrace “indigenismo,” the idea that they were descended from the Aztecs, and Aztec civilization’s valorization as a world-class, great civilization, than they were to embrace African history, of course, since few of us tend to think of Africa as having as magnificent a civilization as the Aztecs—an erroneous assumption but one still rather difficult to alter.

I was now very eager to see black Mexico. I needed to see it. So I made the arrangements I needed to make and set out for the Costa Chica on Mexico’s West Coast. The Costa Chica is known as the blackest part of Mexico. It’s south of Acapulco but doesn’t resemble a resort in the slightest. It is extremely remote—you couldn’t even get there by highway until the mid-1950s. The land is swampy. And the people are desperately poor. Most of them are descended from slaves who toiled there. Other slaves came across the Pacific Ocean and through Acapulco, with the galleons that came from the Philippines. And some of them were runaway slaves or slaves who once labored in Acapulco. There was little racial mixing because the community remained isolated for so long. The Costa Chica started black, and—more than any other part of Mexico that I visited—it has stayed that way.

When we arrived, I asked my driver to take me to San Juan de la Cruz, the Church of St. John of the Cross. I was looking for a particular priest, Father Glyn Jemmott, a Trinidadian Roman Catholic who has lived and worked in the Costa Chica for twenty-five years. We moved slowly through the streets, passing crowds of thin, ragged, desperately impoverished people. Here, finally, were the Afro-Mexicans.

We located the church. And I found Father Glyn, elegant, tall, and thin, who was even more devoted and committed both to his parishioners and to their appreciation of their black heritage than I had hoped he would be. He grasped my hands and welcomed me to his ministry with a loving smile. He led me into the sanctuary and brought me to stand before a statue of a black Christ, the centerpiece of his rural church’s altar. It was a sublime moment for me. The famous Peruvian painting of El Señor de los Milagros was its own marvel, but it was a painting of a white Jesus created by an Angolan slave. But a life-sized sculpture of a crucified black savior, here, in the middle of nowhere? I had never seen a black crucifix close up before.

As Father Glyn fusses over me, making sure I was comfortable, we talked about his life in the Costa Chica. He started out as a simple priest, he told me. But over the years, he’d become an activist. Today, he runs an annual conference of black towns in the region and works tirelessly to raise black awareness. He said that his goal is to help people to become comfortable in their skin, to see in themselves beauty in their black features, to regard them with pride or at least neutrality, rather than as traces of a past and an identity about which to be embarrassed.

“On the first occasion that I said mass,” he told me, “a grown black man came, and he said, ‘Who are you?’ And I said, ‘Well, I am a priest.’ And for about ten minutes he went on, saying, ‘You’re not a priest—you can’t be a priest. I’ve never seen a black priest. We black people only work the land, we load trucks with bricks.’ He grew quite adamant, quite angry. He was insistent.” Welcome to black Mexico.

“You can’t be the head man,” I said, imagining the stranger’s thoughts.

“Exactly,” Father Glyn answered. “He was really talking about himself.”
I asked Father Glyn what it was like to be Afro-descendant in Mexico—and to be really black, someone who couldn’t “pass” for brown or “cosmic.” His face spread in a wise smile. “Everything is against an Afro-Mexican seeing himself as someone who can lift his head and take his place in Mexican society as an equal,” he said. “The black Mexican who cannot claim Latino status is excluded by his lighter-skinned Mexican brother, and if he goes to the US, he’s ostracized by his black US counterpart. I once had the opportunity to talk with some African Americans from Detroit, and they criticized the black people down here for never having heard of Martin Luther King, Jr.”

“In Mexico, blacks have a problem with two parts,” he continued. “One, you have the Afro-Mexican wiping himself off the map, not being able to hold on to anything that would strengthen his identity—that would even give him the chance to call himself black with pride. And two, you have the whole apparatus of the state. Politically, socially, culturally, it has made him invisible. The racism is disguised. On the national level, it’s almost religious to state that Mexico is a country where there is no racism. Up front, people won’t admit that there is racism. But behind closed doors, they have strong negative impressions of blacks.”

Listening to Father Glyn, I was deeply moved. This was a man of God—I felt God in his presence—but also a great thinker. He understood the experience of blackness not as a curse or a blessing but as a fact. In his sympathetic eyes, I could see that he understood the struggle for pride in identity. He felt for every Mexican with black ancestors in his or her genome, with black blood in the veins, as the saying goes.

We began to talk about these issues, and the conversation, interestingly enough, soon turned to an unlikely subject: a comic-book character named Memín Pinguín, whose presence in Mexico dates back to the 1940s. He has come to be well known in North America. In 2005, the Mexican government issued a commemorative stamp featuring Memín Pinguín. Afro-Mexicans didn’t seem to mind. In fact, everyone in Mexico seemed to love it, and the stamp quickly became a collector’s item. African Americans, however, and especially Jesse Jackson, were furious. They looked at images of Memín Pinguín on the news and saw just another offensive black character with monkey-like features. They cried out that Memín Pinguín demeaned blackness. Rev. Jackson flew to Mexico to try and convince President Vicente Fox to recall the stamps and issue an apology. But Fox didn’t budge. He said Mexicans loved Memín Pinguín, and the country never apologized for anything. He told Jackson that he was projecting a US context onto a Mexican text and, well, that he should just get over it. Memín Pinguín was here to stay. I don’t think a US politician could have withstood such an onslaught; President Fox knew his constituency. Memín Pinguín is everywhere; just visit a newsstand.

I pulled some pictures of Memín Pinguín out of my bag, and Father Glyn and I looked them over together. I always have the same reaction. I think this character would be cute if he were a monkey, like Curious George. But this is supposed to be a black child! He’s got big ears, exaggerated lips, and bowed legs. He even has fur on his face. The other characters in the comic book, who are all white, make fun of Memín Pinguín for the way he looks and speaks. He works as a shoe-shine boy and doesn’t do well in school. Now, admittedly, I am an American, but to me, he is just another racist stereotype from the Western museum of racist caricatures, a refugee from a minstrel show. Perhaps it is a Mexican thing that this black man just can’t understand? I am afraid that Rev. Jackson got this one right, at least from our point of view. So I asked Father Glyn what he thought, as a reality check.

“Mexicans, who are very intelligent people, their reaction was that you cannot judge him by the racist standards of the end of the century,” he told me, shaking his head. “It was based on the 1940s. They’re all stereotypes. Speedy Gonzalez? Memín Pinguín just represents a mischievous urban kid. His color doesn’t matter. Mexican society accepts him. There’s no way to say he represents North American racist history. People in the US can’t use him to evaluate the racial interactions we have here.”

I took a moment to think about distinctly American racism. Our circumstances gave birth to a civil rights movement—a movement that was desperately needed. And we were blessed with leaders who made an enormous difference. Those leaders, I remembered again with pride, ultimately made it possible for us to elect our first black president.

“Do you think, based on your experience, that black Mexicans will have a Barack Obama in this generation,” I asked Father Glyn, “like they did at the beginning of the republic, back in 1829, at a time when such a thing was unthinkable in the States?”

“There’s so much that has to be done,” he said, sadly, “so much. Black Mexicans must have access to education, political participation,
social acceptance. These things must be in place before you begin to produce leaders. But I would say I’ve seen some changes. Younger people are saying, with some assertion, ‘Soy negro.’ I was encouraged to hear that. Soy negro means ‘I’m black.’

“Why?” I asked.

“Because of the kind of visibility we’ve been able to generate and all the things that have spun off from that,” he said with pride.

I wanted to learn more about these positive changes. I wanted to meet with someone from this new generation of proud, aware Afro-Mexicans who proclaim, “Soy negro!” So I said goodbye to the wise and caring Father Glyn. And I got in touch with journalist Eduardo Zapata.

Zapata was born and raised in the Costa Chica. Today, he celebrates his black identity and encourages other Afro-Mexicans to join him. In this spirit, he asked me to meet him at another church in Cuajui, where a festival was about to begin. I arrived to find throngs of laughing, happy black people gathered in a churchyard. They were loud and boisterous, and Zapata and I had to push our way through the crowds to reach each other. We met and introduced ourselves in the middle of the mayhem. I found myself shouting over the noise, trying to figure out what was going on.

“One of them was ordained a priest,” Zapata beamed, waving at the crowd. “He makes many of the people here feel proud.”

Music started, and the crowd began to push back, opening up a wide circle for dancing. Soon, a black male dancer came out wearing what looked like an enormous papier-mâché bull costume decorated with long, colorful streamers. The bull began spinning and bobbing about, and Zapata explained that the dance was called the “Toro de Petate.” It’s traditional in Latin America, but it takes on particular significance when danced by blacks. The bull’s captivity serves as a metaphor for African slavery. When blacks dance it with joy, he said, they reclaim their own power, the power of a bull.

The crowd cheered and hollered, throwing their hands in the air and shouting out to the bull. It was an old-fashioned street party.

“Eduardo, this place looks like Harlem to me,” I shouted. “This looks like the Africa of Mexico. It’s great!”

“But we speak Spanish!” Eduardo joked in return. “And we believe in the resurrected Christ.”

He was right. The celebration was black, but the people were Afro-Mexican. I was still learning what this meant. “The Spanish culture, the European culture, we also have that in us,” he explained, leading me away from the noise. “Because of that, it’s difficult to say we’re only blacks. What are we? A mix, a mix.”

“Are you described as a black person, a negro, here in Mexico?” I wanted to know.

“Of course,” he answered. “When you’re little, no one questions it. When you leave here to study or go to Acapulco or go to the US, then you realize you’re different—that you’re Mexican, but you have something that’s not the same as all Mexicans. You discover that you’re black.”

We were safely away from the crowd, and I was grateful to go back to speaking normally. I still didn’t quite understand—Zapata said he was mixed but also black. I was starting to recognize that in Mexico, this duality was so common, it felt normal.

“Do black people suffer discrimination here in Mexico?” I asked next.

“We’re a racist society,” Zapata answered, nodding. “If you are in the cities, they stop you and ask you for your ID card. They make you sing the national anthem, and they accuse you of coming from Cuba to destabilize things. Nobody talks about it, but in every Mexican family, there is a little black person. And you know what the city folks say? ‘He was born black, but we’ll love him anyway.’”
“Tell me about Memín Pinguín,” I said, curious to get Zapata’s opinion. “Do you think the cartoon is racist or not?”

“No,” Zapata said, shaking his head at me. “You go out into the street and ask people, and they’re not worried. It’s just a character. They don’t identify with it. He’s still just in stories. It’s kind of like laughing at yourself, if you take it with humor, with sarcasm.” Sort of like Eddie Murphy doing a postmodern version of Buckwheat, it suddenly occurred to me, or Paul Mooney on the Dave Chappelle Show doing Negrodamus, a black parody of Nostradamus. Or Jack White’s Amos ‘n Andy/Buckwheat parodies on TheRoot.com.

“Why did Jesse Jackson come here to see Vicente Fox?” I pressed. It was so hard for me to believe that visit wasn’t warranted. Just look at Memín Pinguín!

Zapata stopped short and turned to me. I recognized him then as the passionate activist he truly is. “Jesse Jackson should have worried about all the blacks that go to work in Mexico and aren’t treated like people,” he said with conviction. “They’re taught like third-class citizens. He’s not interested in the living black people on the coast. He’s interested in Memín Pinguín. It’s politics.” I had to agree that it is much easier to engage in symbolic politics and to censor a stereotype than it is to affect the unemployment level. But, back home, Jesse Jackson and other black activists don’t get called on this very much, in part because the history of racist representations of blackness is so long and deep and pernicious.

I was taken aback by the edge in Zapata’s voice. Now we were getting somewhere. “Help me understand,” I said, imploring. “I’m trying to figure this out. The difference between being black in America and being black in Mexico—it seems huge. And I don’t want to be a typical gringo, or a typical gringo negro, or whatever it’s called. I don’t want to impose my values on you. I want you to teach me.”

Zapata was silent for a moment. I watched him carefully forming his reply. “Spain conquered us,” he said, quietly. “A religious culture conquered us. But the culture that conquered us was already familiar with blacks. Black slaves already existed in Europe, in Spain, in the courts—even before the conquest. So it’s a different culture. The Africans that came here, who had talent and intelligence, had the capacity to get through the legal barriers that the Spanish put up. For example, if someone was a great artisan, the culture had to accept them and give them privileges. That explains much of the assimilation, the mixing. We’re part of it all. We’re not foreigners. We’re Mexicans too. We also helped to build this country.”

I thought about this. Black pride in Mexico was also national pride—at least in Zapata’s view. He wasn’t going to let talk of a cosmic race break his Afro-Mexican spirit.

(As a point of information, more Africans came to Mexico from Christian Africa—Angola, as we have seen in the chapter on Brazil—than from any other country, by percentage. The whole wave that populated Mexico from 1580 to 1640 was from Angola. So it is a misnomer to say that the Spanish imposed Catholicism on Afro-Mexicans; what they did impose was their version of Catholicism.)

Zapata wished me well as we parted. And he told me that if I wanted to know more about Costa Chica’s black-pride movement, I should track down Israel Reyes, a teacher on the other side of Cuajuí. I got right on it.

When Reyes heard about my project, he invited me over to his home to chat. The place was modest, but he proudly showed me a recording studio in a back room and told me, clasping his hands together with enthusiasm, that he has devoted his life to inspiring Afro-Mexicans to feel pride in their black roots. Every week, he records a radio program called Cmarrón: The Voice of the Afro-Mestizos, celebrating the African influence in Mexican culture. He wants his listeners to honor their African ancestry. And he wants Mexico to recognize the rights of its black population.

“The first step is being included in the census, to make it known that there are black people in Mexico,” he said as we sat down together. “They aren’t just in history books about the time of slavery. Blacks are here now, right now, today. And they are demanding that their rights be recognized.”

I asked what he was doing to achieve this—and he shook his head in anger. “We started a process, we had talks with government authorities,” he replied, urgently, “but at the last minute, they informed us that it was not possible to include a question on the census. But we’re pushing forward with a pilot census for the black population in Mexico.”

“Ah, that’s good!” I exclaimed—this man’s passion was energizing. “How do you think it will benefit the black community to be included?”

“Public policies for these populations,” he answered readily. “Better
living conditions, education, health, housing, access to federal programs. But we have to start by finding out how many blacks there are in Mexico." Black activists are making the same compelling arguments in France, arguments largely falling on deaf ears.

I began to tell him that I couldn't agree more—and then, at the front door, there was a sudden commotion. Reyes bounded up from his chair and grinned. He led some children through the house to me and explained they were there to record a rap song for his program. I couldn't believe my luck. And even though I could tell that my presence made the kids just a little nervous, they were happy to have an audience.

Reyes set up his recording equipment as I looked on, and the kids rehearsed among themselves, snapping their fingers to create their own beats. Soon enough, they were recording.

If they despise me for being black, I don't deny my color
Because among pearls and diamonds, black is better
In the night, the shadow of my color protects me
I don't care what these men, without taste, yell at me

Reyes asked me if I'd like to be part of the radio show, and I readily agreed. "We are being visited today by a very well-known professor, Professor Gates," he spoke into his microphone. "Professor, what do you hope the results of your work in Costa Chica will be?"

"I hope it makes Americans more aware of Mexico's complex racial past," I answered. If I had come to understand anything, I realized, it was that blackness in Mexico is complicated. One could make analogies with the black experience in the States, but it would be foolish to try to impose our interpretive frame onto theirs. All race, all racism, just like politics, is local.

I left Reyes with his budding radio stars. And from his front porch, I looked out at Costa Chica—black Mexico. Everywhere I saw brown and black faces. It felt one-hundred-percent right to me that the nation's black-pride movement should start here. But it must start.

Walking back to my car, it struck me that, in a sense, Mexico is a victim of its own pioneering successes in race relations. It was quite a noble act to abolish slavery in 1829, five years before Britain abolished that pernicious institution throughout its empire, thirty-six years before the United States. But despite these noble beginnings, over time race relations fell prey to a romantic idea—that by getting rid of racial categories officially, this could eradicate racism throughout Mexican society, by firmly rooting it in privileges that stemmed from social and economic differences that were tied to apparent distinctions in race. That didn't happen. As in every Latin American society I visited, one group of people did not melt, to use the metaphor with which we in the United States are so very familiar; one portion of the Afro-descended group didn't blend, and they are, today, the still visibly black Mexican people with dark black skin, kinky hair, and thick lips who live on the Costa Chica and in Veracruz and are scattered throughout Mexico. And they are disproportionately poor.

When José Vasconcelos in 1925 declared Mexicans to be a new, cosmic race, the race of the future, you might say that Mexico—following a period of programmatic attempts to whiten itself—began to embrace and celebrate its brownness, answering Vasconcelos's call with enthusiasm. But brown pride only served to marginalize black culture qua black culture and to marginalize black people economically and socially who had not mixed with whites or with indigenous peoples even further. The Afro-Mexicans of today—as I was informed again and again by the descendants of slaves and free blacks—have paid a very high price for these experiments in race and what we might think of as "categorical racelessness," the living social death resulting from the invisibility of their black cultural and genetic heritage. If your ethnic group can't be counted, then your social presence and your rights as a citizen and as a wage earner, affected in some way by your phenotype, don't count either. And it is for this reason that restoring racial categories to the federal census is such an urgent matter to so many black activists in Mexico.

"Death and invisibility," I murmured to myself, recalling Cruz-Carretero's words, spoken as we looked at the walls of the port of Veracruz. They were chilling words. Was she right? It isn't the mark of a great nation to hide or deny its history, I thought, climbing into my car. But Mexico's blackness isn't gone. It lingers in places like Veracruz and the Costa Chica, where descendants of African slaves never became part of the nation's melting pot. And it lies hidden just beneath the surface of Mexico's national identity, an identity defined, perhaps, by sixteen lovely shades of brownness.
Like Father Glyn, I saw sparks of hope in Mexico. But it’s going to
take a lot of dedicated political missionary work to create a movement
of Afro-Mexicans to reclaim their history—and to be able to declare
with unbridled pride, “Soy negro,” in a society in which being negro
seems only to be acceptable in the diminutive form of a well-known
shoe-shine boy named Memin, or Lucky number 26 in La Loteria.

As I took my leave, I wished Father Glyn and Zapata and Reyes the
strength to carry on, against enormous odds.